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## NOMA Offers Signs of Hope For Black Architects in Boston

By Jeff Stein

THIRTY-NINE YEARS AGO WHITNEY M. YOUNG Jr., the civil rights leader and then head of the Urban League, famously addressed a convention of the American Institute of Architects in a powerful speech that the architecture profession characterizes as a “call to action.”

What Young said in that 1968 speech was this: “You are not a profession that has distinguished itself by your social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights. You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and your complete irrelevance.” Harsh words, but well-deserved, spoken at a time when only 1 percent of the registered architects in America were black.

Fast-forward to 2007, when not quite 1.5 percent of all U.S. architects are black, around 1,500 in all. The American Institute of Architects now annually presents the Whitney M. Young Jr. Award to “an architect or architecturally-oriented organization that exemplifies the profession’s responsibility toward current social issues.” NOMA, the National Organization of Minority Architects, received the award this past week at the AIA’s annual convention in San Antonio.

### Real Work Ahead

NOMA was nominated for the Whitney Young award by the Boston Society of Architects. In her letter of nomination, BSA President Jane Weinzapfel said that since its founding in 1971, “NOMA has become a source of hope and a symbol of support of an often-disheartening career choice for black Americans.” The award has itself become such a source and symbol, too. But the award only sounds like a lovely idea until

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Photo courtesy Stull and Lee Inc.

The new John O'Bryant African-American Institute at Northeastern University was designed by Boston's black-led firm, Stull and Lee Inc.

one observes the current state of minority exclusion from both American architectural practice and architectural education.

The National Organization of Minority Architects was founded in 1971. It advocates on behalf of architects of color and for making all 117 of our North American schools of architecture themselves increasingly diverse in their populations. There are NOMA chapters in 20 cities – Boston among them – and at 40 schools of architecture (the collegiate acronym is the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students, or NOMAS). The organization has real work ahead of it.

The situation at the American schools of architecture is particularly curious. Currently, around 40 percent of architects of

color in the United States have graduated from just seven schools of architecture. These are the HBCUs – historically black colleges and universities – with names like Hampton University, Morgan State, and until just this year, Tuskegee Institute. In a particularly startling show of lack of faith in the future of architecture and design, Tuskegee’s administration has allowed its architecture school’s professional accreditation to lapse. And making the task of national inclusion NOMA has set for itself even more difficult, 80 percent of all black architecture students are currently enrolled at those same seven (now only six) HBCUs.

Architect Steven Lewis, vice president of NOMA nationally, is just completing a year-

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long Loeb Fellowship at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in Cambridge, an architecture school that consistently ranks at the top of American design education. It must be noted that the GSD has graduated only 40 black architects ever. Lewis' day job is in the office of the chief architect of the General Services Administration in Washington, D.C. His Loeb Fellowship and his work as editor of NOMA's quarterly journal have allowed him to undertake research and lead symposia recently on race and architecture.

Lewis notes a raised sense of minority awareness generally across the nation, due in part to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina and the recent outrage caused by Don Imus. Yet he is also the first to point out that social change in the profession of architecture won't occur simply because we have more conversations or more awards. He advocates action.

Here in Boston, there are three signs of hope from NOMA:

- The Whitney M. Young Jr. Award winner last year, Boston educator Dr. Ted Landsmark, knew Young personally. Landsmark, a NOMA member, is president of both the Boston Architectural College and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture. He received the 2006 Whitney Young award as a result of his leading the American Institute of Architects' Committee on Diversity. Back in Boston, Landsmark has helped engineer a gift from the Houseman Fund to support scholarships for minority high school students at the BAC, raising the possibility of a more inclusive profession not too far into the future.

- The new John O'Bryant African-American Institute at Northeastern University in Boston was designed by the city's black-led firm, Stull and Lee Inc. Highly regarded for planning Boston's Southwest Corridor and renovating South Station, NOMA supporters Don Stull and David Lee enjoy an international practice. At Northeastern, partnering with master planner William Rawn Architects, Stull and Lee have included Ethiopian precedents of form and ornament in the design of the O'Bryant Institute, opening up new possibilities – a cornucopia, really – of images that white America didn't know it had available. Inclusion is how renaissances occur.

- Andre Vega is founder and president of Boston's NOMA chapter and shared in last week's Whitney Young award. A young architect, one of only 29 blacks out of 7,000 regis-



Photo courtesy Stull and Lee Inc.

**Northeastern University's John O'Bryant African-American Institute (above) includes design elements that may be unfamiliar to white America.**

tered architects in Massachusetts and a graduate of Wentworth Institute in Boston, he serves as senior project architect for his five-person design firm, Concord-based Concord Architects. He has just returned from Guam, where he is running one of the firm's projects abroad. The message here is that if architects want to work globally, in a diverse world, there must be a diverse staff back home.

NOMA's Steven Lewis asks: What is our

current society accomplishing for future generations? What do we tell those generations about ourselves by the buildings we leave behind? Through his work with NOMA, he hopes to expand America's cultural reservoir.

Congratulations to NOMA on its award. Good luck to us in Boston and around the United States as we, too, move to expand opportunity and visibility in a profession that so far has been resistant to it. ■

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